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Home > News > The Villager > Business

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Safeguard: Houston company revolutionizes home inspection process

By: HOWARD RODEN, HCN/ Courier staff

03/10/2005

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Photo by Jerry Baker

Long before the advent of X-ray and MRI machines, a doctor could only prod, probe and sometimes cut

into his patient in order to learn the precise nature of an illness. In many respects, home inspections today rely on that same methodology. When checking the worthiness of a home, quality inspectors do a thorough visual inspection. They root around in its nooks and crannies, looking for tell-tale signs that may - or may not - indicate a problem in the roof, with the foundation or in the electrical or plumbing systems.

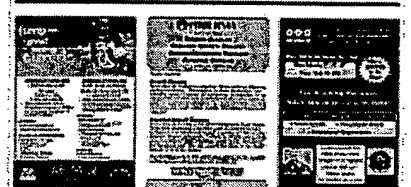
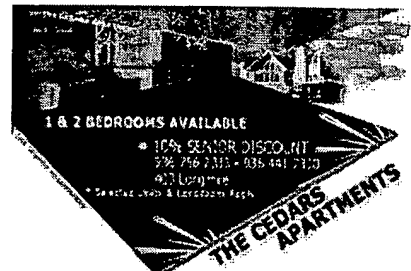
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Occasionally, inspectors will perform "exploratory surgery" on a house to confirm a suspicion, such as an

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infestation of termites. But in most cases, inspectors have been limited by their inability to see and hear through walls.

Not anymore.

Thanks to a former University of Mississippi scientist, home inspections are finally entering the 21st century. Peng Lee developed a revolutionary system of customized infrared cameras, an ultra-sensitive acoustic sensor and sound recognition computer software that has removed virtually all of the guesswork from home inspections.

With Lee's technology, a home inspector literally can "see through walls." The infrared cameras detect variances in temperature that can reveal "hot spots" due to faulty electrical wiring or an accumulation of moisture. The moisture could be evidence of a water leak, mold or termites.

The listening device, which contains a needle-like probe that can be inserted into sheet rock without discernable damage, confirms the presence of termites and other pests.

But this technology isn't restricted to the laboratory. Lee, along with fellow Ole Miss alum Kevin Seddon, formed HomeSafe Inspections Inc. in 2003, and their company has blossomed like a Mississippi magnolia, with franchises and licensees in 19 states, including Texas. Since Lee invented his device while at the University of Mississippi, the school receives a portion of HomeSafe's franchise and licensing fees. HomeSafe has both franchises and a corporate-owned unit in Houston, and the company is looking to expand in this market.

"Houston's real estate market is healthy and growing," said Seddon, who is HomeSafe's president. "It's a great fit for us."

Montgomery County, with its current boom in residential construction, is an attractive target, said Van Vanlandingham, sales director for HomeSafe's Houston office.

"Our technology helps both the seller and the buyer (of homes)," he said. "Presale inspection helps the seller know the exact condition his home is in, and if there is any need to repair any damage our inspections detect. The buyer is protected because he has a complete, detailed report on the home's condition. It's a true win-win situation."

No one knows that better than Bill McIlwain, a co-owner of Prudential Gary Greene Realtors, one of Houston's largest real estate companies. McIlwain became aware of HomeSafe about 18 months ago when he and Vanlandingham had a chance encounter on the golf course.

McIlwain was looking to purchase a 4,850-square-foot home that had been empty for five years.

"I was buying it for my personal use, and it was a large home with a lot of leaks and potential problems," he said. "I wasn't sure I wanted to buy it until I knew just how extensive the problems were."

A high-tech HomeSafe inspection revealed the problems were not as detailed as McIlwain had feared.

"Last June, I was looking at buying a home as a rent house," he said. "It also had some leaks, but they

(HomeSafe) came out and their inspection made me realize there were no major problems. The problems were easy to fix, and I quickly rented the home."

As a satisfied customer, McIlwain has encouraged members of the Gary Greene sales force to embrace the new technology. Nikki Owen, sales manager at Gary Greene's Fort Bend County office, recently hosted a HomeSafe demonstration for about 50 agents.

"It really is the wave of the future," she said. "We would certainly recommend to any buyer and seller. The more information a buyer can have about a house, the better off they're going to be."

A comprehensive inspection like HomeSafe's reduces the threat of lawsuits, Owen said.

"This allows any concerns about the home to be brought to the forefront and become resolved before any sale," said Owen, adding that "many" of her agents have begun recommending HomeSafe inspections to buyers.

Although HomeSafe has yet to reach Montgomery County, local broker Keith Robertson is eager for a demonstration. Owner of Top Guns Realty, the county's largest independent real estate office, Robertson believes the infrared and acoustic technology used by HomeSafe is "the greatest thing since sliced bread."

"I'd like to talk with them about that," he said. "That kind of technology is spectacular."

Spectacular is an apt way to describe how Lee's system - which is patent pending - works. Infrared technology is nothing new; it has been used in the U.S. military for decades. But many of those systems require a temperature difference of 20-30 degrees.

HomeSafe's infrared unit, which is manufactured by Raytheon, works in an environment with no more than a 10-degree temperature difference. The camera is so sensitive at detecting heat transference, a hand placed on a wall for as little as five seconds leaves a clearly defined handprint on the camera's monitor.

If the camera is aimed at a wall long enough, wall studs and even nail heads in the sheet rock are discernable, said Mike Poth, one of HomeSafe's Houston inspectors. "We've completed an inspection on one existing home where we discovered there wasn't one piece of insulation in the walls," Poth said. "But the most important discovery is fire safety. A lot of times, people don't realize a dimmer switch is overheating and could start a fire."

That is why Poth and fellow inspector Gus Smith recommend periodic preventative home inspections.

"The only time most people do a home inspection is when they buy a house," he said. "That's like going to a doctor once in your lifetime and assuming you'll never get sick."

Smith stressed that HomeSafe's technology does not replace the conventional home inspection methods, but merely enhances them.

"A conventional home inspection can see about 33 percent of the home. Our inspections exposes at least another 30 percent," he said. "A lot of the time, our technology merely confirms what our visual inspection suggests."




A HomeSafe inspection takes an average of 2 1/2

hours, and rates for an inspection start at \$200 for a home up to 2,000 square feet (including garage). HomeSafe's rates are comparable to those of a conventional inspection, Robertson said. HomeSafe also donates a portion of its Houston inspection fees to Houston-based Sunshine Kids. Business is booming for HomeSafe, and not just because of its revolutionary technology. Money Magazine rated the home inspection industry as one of the "Top 10 Highest Income Home Businesses (over \$100,000 per year)" and among "America's 50 Hottest jobs."

Vanlandingham said franchises are available in the Houston area, with \$12,000 as the normal startup fee. "With one franchise for every 40,000 households, we're definitely looking for inspectors," he said. "Once the word gets out, everyone will want this type of inspection."

For more information about HomeSafe and its infrared technology, call Vanlandingham at (713) 858-2708 or Gus Brandt, professional inspector, at (281) 481-2580, or visit www.homesafeinspection.com. Howard Roden may be reached at hroden@mail.hcnonline.net.

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